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The Perception of AIDS

Margaret Spinoza



Course: WRT 109, Practices of Writing (Honors)

Instructor: Amber Luce

Author's Note: This essay argues how rhetorical modes of healthcare, particularly the visual, are applicable to AIDS today.

Editors' Note: Margaret does a great job at connecting her own ideas to the facts from her research.

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Photos by Colin Fanning

It is widely acknowledged that the rapid diffusion of the AIDS virus has made a devastating impact upon the global community over the last few decades. The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, an alliance of ten UN agencies concentrating their combined efforts on the eradication of AIDS, even made the assertion that this international epidemic has evolved into, "the single greatest reversal in human development" (UNAIDS 1). With the number of reported infections and subsequent deaths incessantly increasing, worldwide inaction delivers an undeniable death sentence to those affected most by the virulent illness. Thus, the prevention of AIDS should be directed towards the groups at highest risk of contracting and spreading the disease. As society is persistently modified and transformed, the target groups associated with AIDS have made a dramatic shift in recent years. Previously associated with sexual orientation and immoral behavior, the AIDS disease transcends past population genres. Instead, the overlapping commonality between AIDS victims correlates to a disadvantaged economic status.

The proliferation of AIDS transmission is largely attributable to unprotected sexual relations and the usage of infected needles. In order for the prevention of the virus to be successful, the frequency of precarious behavior in low-income constituencies must be drastically reduced. Therefore, the greatest challenge to confronting the AIDS epidemic is the inadequate funding for preventative protection. AVERT, an international charity stationed in the United Kingdom, is a private organization struggling to tackle the obstacles associated with the AIDS outbreak. As the world's most popular AIDS website, AVERT focuses its attention on disseminating critical information to the greatest number of willing viewers. Statistics from AVERT's website shows that HIV prevention on a global scale needs immense improvement. The data sampled from low-income countries in 2005 demonstrates the inefficiency of HIV prevention services for economically disadvantaged populations. In this case, preventative assistance reached less than 50% of sex-workers and only 20% of injecting drug users (Noble 1). Political and cultural attitudes also play a significant role as some governing bodies are against the promotion of condoms as well as other forms of sexual protection. In addition, organizations, both government and private, often refuse monetary support for sterile needles and similar programs since drug abuse and sexual promiscuity are considered a moral problem resulting as a consequence of immoral behavior. Thus, governmental disapproval and residual social stigmas, promote unsafe conduct in populations where individuals cannot afford to protect or educate themselves.

Though more funding is necessary to curb the disparity between AIDS victims segregated by the widening gap of the socioeconomic ladder, substantial services have been brought to those in low-income and lower-middle

income countries where 95% of AIDS victims reside. The numbers of people who are receiving anti-retroviral treatments have increased by fivefold between 2003 and 2006 (UNAIDS 1). Additionally, some countries have reported decreases in AIDS-related deaths, especially in regions where strong preventative actions have been implemented. Though these facts demonstrate a step in the right direction,

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they do not hold enough significance on a wider, global scale where the effects of AIDS become progressively more devastating.

Mamello, a 20-year-old South African, shares

his perspective on Avert.org as a means of encouragement for AIDS victims across the globe. Though he has tested negative for the disease, he has witnessed numerous intimates succumb to the epidemic steadily ravaging his country. "So many of the people I grew up with are becoming sick and dying. In South Africa, funerals used to be held on Saturdays only. These days, it's a Monday to Monday affair... and what's even sadder is that so much time and money is being spent on education and prevention, and it's hard to see the positive effects." Mamello concludes by saying, "AFRICA IS DYING SLOWLY" (AVERT 1). He is one of many plagued by doubt and disbelief that AIDS will be conquered in the near future. However, funding has grown exponentially in recent years and Dr. Peter Piot, the UNAIDS executive director, addresses the global community claiming that, "We are at a critical stage in the AIDS response where 'making the money work' for countries is vital if we are going to get ahead of the epidemic" (UNAIDS 13). The distribution of monetary assets towards preventative measures aimed at assisting the underprivileged in the poorest populations is the key to quelling the AIDS epidemic. Society can no longer categorize the AIDS virus as a "gay cancer," one which affects a "subversive" element of the populace regarded as immoral miscreants. The state of the AIDS epidemic demands immediate global attention as the situation has escalated into an international crisis pursuing the economically disadvantaged.

The evolution of AIDS visuals highlights the dynamic population shifts targeted by the AIDS disease over the past decades. Characterizing posters from the late 1980's and early 1990's, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation launched a revolutionary campaign directed towards gay males who frequented queer clubs, bars, and restaurants. Similar to bathroom stall ads, the "How Do You Know What You Know?" campaign aimed their message at young gay men engaging in unprotected sex. Using explicit and raw images, early AIDS ads employed unambiguous tactics to emphasize the risk of gay males

acquiring AIDS without the proper and consistent use of protection. However, AIDS ads in the 21st century have evolved with the subsequent shifts in the target populations. Many cartoons and illustrated editorials highlight the political satire accenting the irony of AIDS and poverty. In addition, graphic images, especially explicit photography from AIDS-stricken countries have become powerful tools in representing the present populations affected by the disease. It is evident through the sequential analysis of AIDS visuals that the face of the virus has changed momentarily in a short amount of time. The disease rises above sexual preference; instead, AIDS afflicts the financially impoverished who are unaware of or cannot afford preventative measures let alone exorbitantly expensive treatments when the disease is diagnosed.

Many popular visuals familiar in today's consumerist market often employ celebrities as focal points in ads meant to represent the desperately poor AIDS victims in low-income countries, especially Africa. The irony of comparing such strikingly different populations seems as if it would be counter effective to the cause. However, Marka Hansen, the director of Gap North America, gives evidence to prove the positive effects of Gap's AIDS campaign. "Since launching last year, (Product) Red has contributed more than \$45 million to the Global Fund to finance programs that help women and children affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa." The AIDS epidemic is directly intertwined with poverty; however, the modes of AIDS ads which are currently popular disregard this critical aspect of the epidemic. Instead of demonstrating the neediness of AIDS victims, creators of AIDS visuals opt for illustrating luxury and social wealth. This paradox allows viewers a false sense of security, and blinds audiences to the socioeconomic AIDS crisis. The contrast of wealth and poverty seen throughout these contemporary ads should highlight the economic disparity between AIDS victims and the naive generation which is presently blinded by egocentric concerns.

Prevention is the most effective means by which to surpass the economic inequalities of AIDS treatment and preventative services on a global scale. Without these critical services, the AIDS epidemic will continue to escalate and the situation may become irreparable. However, there are many skeptics who question increased global spending on HIV/AIDS. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has stirred doubt in the minds of some health care experts. Jeremy Shiffman of Syracuse University, who studies health care expenditures says, "AIDS is a terrible humanitarian tragedy, but it's just one of many terrible humanitarian tragedies" (Cheng 2). Featured in an article titled "Why Some Claim the AIDS Crisis is Overblown," Shiffman is one of several persons highlighted who oppose increased monetary spending on AIDS services. The overarching complaint seems to be that AIDS

treatments could hog funding and may damage other health programs (Cheng 2). The scholar goes into greater detail as he defends his thesis concerning health policies in the Oxford Journals. In his paper, "Has donor prioritization of HIV/AIDS displaced aid for other health issues?" Shiffman indicates that pertinent trends displaying the displacement effect of HIV/AIDS' rapidly growing share of total health aid is a concern for global health agencies (Shiffman 1). Providing universal preventative services to low-income countries will require immense monetary resources which could be used for other important health-related issues; thus, it is understandable that some may question whether this goal is both necessary and productive (UNAIDS 5). With resonating force, the economics of

the AIDS epidemic is possibly the most substantial problem of the modern era and must be treated accordingly. If additional resources are not allocated for prevention now, the cost will certainly be too great to afford in the future. The high levels of funding that will be required to move towards universal access in the

Many cartoons and illustrated editorials highlight the irony of AIDS and poverty.

approaching years expose the global failure to respond to AIDS before it evolved into an international crisis. Had the world community executed sensible investments two decades ago, especially in prevention and in strengthening preventative services in low-income countries, more manageable amount of money would be needed today. Moreover, this exact ideology remains true and the world cannot afford the cost of inaction and blindness. According to statistics presented in a UNAIDS presentation, a comprehensive prevention response would prevent more than half of all new infections that will occur in the next ten years. Though AIDS treatment legislation like President Bush's PEPFAR are necessary, it is even more critical to spend money on preventative programs. The cost of AIDS funding will continue to accrue without preventative action and the gap between funding available and funding required will increase each year as seen in the figure below (UNAIDS 6).

The financial resources spent on prevention programs will be the solution to helping economically disadvantaged populations protect themselves and their communities against the AIDS epidemic in years to come.

AIDS is not a livable disease because it is undeniable death for the majority of those who are infected by it. The treatment of AIDS merely constructs a prison for the victims of the disease. Governments who choose not to appropriately apportion financial resources to the prevention of AIDS are building an uninhabitable penitentiary where individuals are tortured through the prolonging of their life. Michele Foucault, author of *Right of Death and Power Over Life*, addresses governmental exploitation of a vulnerable population through the idea of biopower. The AIDS disease complies with Foucault's cautions con-

cerning biopower because victims are tortured through life, not death, through the administration of drugs, and through the extension of an anguished existence. The prevention of AIDS should be addressed with greater stamina by the government head in order to prevent further infections. AIDS is a disease which impinges upon the rights of the economically disadvantaged. Though it is important for charities and private organizations to protest the dispersion of AIDS, governments need to lift the burden by making a greater case for AIDS prevention and awareness in the global community.

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